

# **Influences on the Capacities for Emotional Resilience of Teachers in Schools Serving Disadvantaged Urban Communities: Challenges of Living on the Edge**

## **Abstract**

This paper investigates how teachers in one school in a socio-economically disadvantaged urban setting draw upon their capacities for resilience to maintain a sense of positive professional identity, commitment and moral purpose. It identifies the dynamic influences of individual, school environment, relational, leadership and external personal and policy contexts. The findings show that the capacity for ‘emotional resilience’ is essential for teachers who constantly “live on the edge,” as they seek to manage everyday, intensive pupil motivational and behavioural challenges whilst responding to demands for raising standards of teaching, learning and attainment.

**Keywords:** emotional resilience, urban schools, variations in teacher capacity, leadership, sources of support

# **Influences on the Capacities for Emotional Resilience of Teachers in Schools Serving Disadvantaged Urban Communities: Challenges of Living on the Edge**

## **Introduction**

Over the past decades, there has been much emphasis placed by governments on resolving persisting problems of equity and on raising academic standards in schools (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ladd, 2012). One persistent challenge to achieving these in many countries has been high levels of teacher attrition, particularly among early career teachers and teachers in schools which serve high need communities. Government responses have tended to focus on providing solutions, through, for example, the development of support systems for early career (e.g. induction, mentoring and coaching schemes) and other teachers (e.g. through career progression points), rather than investigating its root causes. Whilst a plethora of research has focused on understanding why many teachers in the pre and early phases of their careers leave the profession (Flores, 2006; Johnson & Down, 2013; Johnson et al., 2015), much, though not all, of this points to the changes in teachers' working conditions, workload and roles caused by the demands of new public management and policy-led reforms that challenge traditional notions of teacher professionalism (e.g. Troman, 2000, 2008). Other research has focused upon understanding the factors that influence teachers to stay in teaching, identifying the importance of teachers' motivations, positive, stable sense of professional identity, efficacy, job satisfaction, work engagement, commitment and resilience (e.g. Johnson et al., 2012; Author et al., 2009, 2011, 2014; Huberman, 1993; Moore-Johnson, 2004; Kirkpatrick & Moore-Johnson, 2014; Papatraianou & Le Cornu, 2014). However, there is relatively little research that investigates the multiple factors which influence teachers' capacities for resilience in schools that serve high need urban communities and the part that emotions play in ensuring that they are able to teach to their best.

## **The Challenge of Context**

This paper reports research that investigated the perceived resilience of all the teachers in one primary school situated in a large public housing estate in a city in the Midlands region of England. The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals (a proxy for socio-economic disadvantage) in Winterton Primary school (a fictional name), with 229 pupils between the ages of 3 and 11, was more than twice the national average, and the proportion of disabled pupils and those who had special educational needs was above the national average. The proportion of pupils from ethnic minority groups and those who spoke English as an additional language was average. Pupil attendance figures were below average with a few pupils persistently absent. The most recent independent Ofsted inspection report (the independent Office for Standards in Education that judges the quality of schools in England) had rated the school as 'good' in the four main categories of: achievement of pupils; quality of teaching; behaviour and safety of pupils and; leadership and management. Standards of

reading by the time the pupils left the school were reported to be below average, although this represented good progress from the ‘very low’ starting points on entry. The 10 full time teachers, including the new head and recently appointed deputy and a large number of classroom teaching assistants, were reported as taking every opportunity to raise pupils’ expectations and build their sense of self worth. The new head teacher (with previous past experience of teaching in the school) had been appointed in September, 2013. On examining the pupil progress data carefully, she had found the judgments of the Ofsted inspectors to have been “too generous.”

The challenges of working in schools serving low-income urban communities are emotionally intense and complex. Most students in these schools continue to perform less well than others (West & Pennell, 2003; Whitty, 2001; Strand, 2013), the schools they attend tend to attract less well qualified teachers and they suffer from higher than average teacher turnover and attrition (Ingersoll, 2003; Gaikhorst, Beishuizen, Korstjens, & Volman, 2014; Lankford, Loeb & Wyckoff, 2002). They face a wide range of challenges (e.g. physical and mental health issues, low student literacy levels on entry, incidents of violence, and unsupportive home environments) which are often associated with students’ absenteeism and motivational and behavioural problems (Chapman & Harris, 2004; Harris, 2010). Dorothy, a teacher at Winterton, drew attention to the distinctive challenges that teachers faced in comparison with others who taught in more affluent areas. “There are some teachers that sit very comfortably in the suburbs who would not be at their absolute best because they’ve not got to manage the challenges in terms of the different behaviours of the children here.” Other research has found, also, that the levels of students’ social and emotional development is associated, positively and negatively, with student learning and academic performance (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Marzano, Marzano, & Pickering, 2003). Students’ wellbeing and progress and development in schools that serve the most challenging communities are, therefore, likely to be heavily dependent on their teachers’ commitment to care for and about them. The resilience challenges for those who work in disadvantaged communities in managing students’ challenging behaviors and lack of motivation associated with problems faced in home environments are likely to be emotionally intense and persistent. In developing caring and trusting relationships with students through creating and sustaining safe learning environments, and in managing students’ behavioral challenges teachers will, therefore, need to expend high levels of emotional energy. For this, they will need substantial reservoirs of “everyday emotional resilience” (Author, 2014).

Teachers at Winterton may be described as ‘living on the edge’, teaching in circumstances that required the effective management of constant emotional, intellectual, personal and professional challenges in order to succeed in engaging students in learning and achievement. This research draws attention to the particular struggles they faced, their exercise of “everyday emotional resilience” (Author, 2014) as they coped with or managed the emotional as well as intellectual challenges of working everyday with students whose home lives were often fractured, fragmented, unpredictable and emotionally dysfunctional. Whilst this

research did not seek to address issues of attrition and retention directly, its findings have implications for understanding why schools in challenging urban communities do or do not retain teachers who are committed, how they might do so, and why supporting teachers' capacities for emotional resilience is a key part of every headteacher's role.

### **Teaching as emotional work: managing the capacity for everyday emotional resilience**

There are numerous studies that focus on teaching as emotional work (e.g. Schutz & Zembylas, 2009; Sutton, 2004; van Veen & Slegers, 2006), and these suggest that emotions play a key part in processes of building and sustaining resilience. Long ago, Hochschild (1983), in a study which included airline stewards but not teachers, coined the term, "emotional labor." She described the negative effects on workers of the commodification of emotions in work in which the employing organization requires employees to enhance, fake, and/or suppress their public expressions of emotion to achieve success. Whilst this would not apply to the work of teachers directly, since theirs is not a "customer" service relationship but a series of negotiated teacher-student, teaching-learning relationships, there can be little doubt that these demand teachers' emotional as well as intellectual engagement. Engagement itself has been found to, "predict greater motivation...increased productivity...and higher rates of employee retention" (Kirkpatrick and Moore-Johnson, 2014, p. 233). Sustained engagement, by definition, requires authentic caring relationships in which teachers are able to draw upon continuing reserves of emotional energy on a daily basis (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992; Furu, 2007; Pyhältö, Pietarinen, & Salmela-Aro, 2011) as they seek to, "understand others, to have empathy with their situation, to feel their feelings as part of their own" (England & Farkas, 1986, p. 91). Yet in a small scale study of the positive and negative effects of the emotional labour of caring in enacting teaching in an inclusive classroom, Isenbarger and Zembylas (2006, p. 120) found that, whilst care was multi-faceted, mediated by the strength of teachers' vocation and moral purposes, caring relationships could also become, "a source of emotional strain, anxiety, disappointment," and have an impact on teachers' commitment, satisfaction and self-esteem.

Historically, the psychological literature has understood resilience as being the successful adaption to stressors or risk factors (Goldstein & Brooks, 2006; Patterson, 2002; Wright & Masten, 2006). This literature has been challenged as presenting an unduly limited perspective. Positive psychology research has developed the notion of resilience not as a fixed attribute, located in individuals' histories but as dynamic, able to change in relation to environments and associated with notions of 'well-being' and "flourishing" (Fredrickson, 2001; Keyes & Haidt, 2003); and socio-cultural research has further acknowledged the ways in which social conditions influence capacities for resilience (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Oswald, Johnson, & Howard, 2003). Recent research in education has shown also that:

- i) resilience is a latent capacity. Teachers' capacity for resilience is not a static or fixed trait, but dynamic, subject to fluctuation in relation to the influences of internal and

external challenges and strength of vocation, personal assets, relationships with students, parents, colleagues, school leaders, and personal or professional life circumstances (Author, 2007; Author et al., 2014);

- ii) resilience does not only reside within individuals but in their “capacity for connection” (Jordan, 2012, p. 73). This acknowledges the importance of supportive, reciprocal relationships in schools and, by implication, the key role of the head teacher in building social capital to “enhance collective efficacy and shared beliefs of professional control, influence and responsibility” (Author et al., 2014, p. 11); and
- iii) there are associations between teachers’ capacities for resilience and their perceived and relative effectiveness in terms of measurable student attainments (Author, 2007; Author, 2012; Author, 2014; Brunetti, 2006; Castro, Kelly, & Shih, 2010).

Thus, whilst resilience has been defined traditionally as “the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances” (Masten et al., 1990, p. 426), when applied to teachers’ work in schools, this definition has been adapted to become, “the capacity to maintain equilibrium and a sense of commitment and agency in the everyday worlds in which teachers work” (Author et al., 2013, p. 26). Yet managing equilibrium and sustaining a sense of commitment in challenging environments are likely to involve both the intellect and the emotions of teachers.

The use of the term, ‘*everyday emotional resilience*’ is premised upon two key research findings about the survival and wellbeing needs of teachers and the nature of teaching. In terms of the former, research in behavioral medicine has demonstrated a relationship between positive emotions and health (Davidson & McEwen, 2012); and it has been claimed that “emotions are central to the function of the brain and to the life of the mind” (Davidson & Begley, 2012, p. ix). In terms of the latter, teaching studies reveal that a sense of vulnerability is both an individual emotional state or experience which may trigger intense emotions in individual teachers and a key “structural characteristic” of teaching, since teachers are not fully in control of their working conditions or indeed able to predict a direct cause and effect relationship between their teaching and student outcomes (Kelchtermans, 2009, p. 265).

Understanding the influences on teachers’ capacities for everyday emotional resilience has become increasingly important as their roles, responsibilities and accountabilities have been extended and intensified by governments’ quests to improve measurable student outcomes through policies that have demanded changes in teachers’ practices. Parental expectations have also changed and students have become more discriminating about what they consider to be good teaching, as traditional forms of teaching have been challenged by developments in technology and social media (Author, 2011; Ebersohn, Loots, Eloff, & Ferreira, 2015). Thus, teachers who strive to teach to their best in these circumstances require the capacity for emotional resilience. This is different than being able to cope emotionally with

the exigencies of teaching. ‘Coping’ implies survival, whereas ‘resilience’ implies being able to manage the challenges in such a way that success is achieved i.e. the individual progresses beyond the use of coping strategies.

## Research Questions

1. What kinds of collective challenges do teachers who work in highly disadvantaged urban school settings experience?
2. Are there variations between teachers’ capacities for emotional resilience?
3. What is the role of the headteacher in promoting the capacity for emotional resilience in teachers?
4. How important is the support of family and friends?

## Methods

The bounded system for this research was one primary school located in one of the largest public housing estates in a city in the Midlands region of England. Its identity and the names of its teachers are anonymised in this paper. The research employed a qualitative case study, in order to “retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events” (Yin, 2009, p. 4). It considered that each individual teacher was situated within a complex web of relationships and social environments, both inside and outside of the school context.

Documents concerning school context, student progress and achievement were collected and analysed in order to establish the social and academic profile of the school. All teachers in the school, the deputy teacher, and the head teacher (N=10) were interviewed individually (see Table 1 below).

**Table 1**

Participants’ Background Information

| Pseudonym | Gender | Grade level to teach<br>(students’ age) | Number of years taught at this<br>school | Number of<br>years taught<br>altogether |
|-----------|--------|---|--|---|
| Steven    | M      | Foundation 1 (3-4 yrs.)                 | 1 year                                   | 7 years                                 |
| Beverley  | F      | Foundation 2 (4-5 yrs.)                 | 4 years                                  | 5 years                                 |
| Natalie   | F      | Year 1 (5-6 yrs.)                       | 2 years                                  | 2 years                                 |
| Katherine | F      | Year 2 (6-7 yrs.)                       | 1 year                                   | 11 years                                |
| Elisabeth | F      | Year 3 (7-8 yrs.)                       | 5 years                                  | 5 years                                 |
| Julie     | F      | Year 4 (8-9 yrs.)                       | 27 years                                 | 27 years                                |
| Dorothy   | F      | Year 5 (9-10 yrs.)                      | 3 years                                  | 20 years                                |
| David     | M      | Year 6 (10 -11 yrs.)                    | 7 years                                  | 15 years                                |
| Sue       | F      | Deputy Teacher                          | 1st year                                 | 7 years                                 |

|           |   |              |         |          |
|-----------|---|--------------|---------|----------|
| Christine | F | Head Teacher | 2 years | 20 years |
|-----------|---|--------------|---------|----------|

An initial rapport building process was undertaken with the head teacher to establish the researchers' warrant and discuss the interview protocol in terms of its relevance and ethical considerations. After modifying interview questions through multiple iterations to increase the clarity and relevance of each question, semi-structured interviews were prepared to serve as a reference guide for the interviewer, while following the natural flow of participants' remarks. Eight teachers and two school leaders were individually interviewed towards the end of the school year. Each participant was interviewed once, and interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Using the traditional paper and pencil method, data were analysed inductively (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to reduce and display data to assist in drawing conclusions. In order to allow thematic structures to emerge from the data rather than prescribed theories or assumptions, first, each researcher independently read and re-read the transcripts while highlighting significant meaningful units, which served as coding categories. These were constantly compared and contrasted within and across participants' transcripts, so that refined coding categories were generated. Through on-going discussions between the two researchers, the refined categories were further compared, contrasted, and aggregated in order to identify patterns and clusters. During this process, some of the codes and categories were modified and merged. Researchers continued to discuss relationships between categories and linkages in the emerging data structure. Throughout this process, common themes were identified to reflect overall context and meaning, while individual narratives were being constructed (Creswell, 2012; LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). In order to ensure trustworthiness, the two researchers triangulated and constructed emergent matrices. Member checks were also conducted by asking the participant to read and comment on themes and direct quotes.

## Findings

All teachers at Winterton school faced similar, collective challenges - students' learning and behaviour issues that were closely tied to their home/community environment, heavy workload, finding work-life balance, and pressure to meet the government's accountability standards. Yet, despite the challenging conditions, the teachers seemed to have relatively strong capacities for resilience. Whilst a few were struggling to cope, most were actively managing the pressures of work and its effects on their personal lives and there was no history of extended teacher absences or intentions to leave either the school or their teaching careers. Rather, they were all striving to teach to their best in the midst of various combinations of challenges.

### *1. Managing the Collective Emotional Challenge (Research Question 1)*

There were three on-going everyday features of working in the particular school and

community environment that were common to all teachers: the social and emotional challenges of the students; the challenges of external high stakes accountability demands; and the challenges of work-life management. Together, these tested their abilities to sustain their capacities for resilience.

### *1.1. Social and Emotional Challenges of Students*

All teachers were keenly aware of the social and emotional challenges which students brought. Lack of parental involvement in students' learning and social development and lack of home caring and support structures were often translated into students' attitudinal and behavioural problems, lack of motivation and aspiration, and school attendance problems. Julie, a veteran teacher who had been teaching in this school for 27 years, commented,

We have high standards in behaviour at school and sometimes you feel that there aren't many behaviour expectations at home, so that can be a challenge. Sometimes you've got children coming in who have got quite sad home lives and it's how you deal with that and how you can support them. It's fairly consistent on a day-to-day basis.

Steven, who had been teaching the youngest children in this school for seven years, highlighted the lack of parental support and its impact on his work.

Making sure that all the children are being looked after, better maybe at school than at home, and making sure the parents feel positive about school. I think that's a high challenge because the parents don't necessarily listen. They are very loud very, very loud and the children are very much *on* you all the time

Dorothy, a mature entrant to teaching, associated entrenched attitudes of parents with students' lack of motivation and aspirations

Their [students'] learning behaviour is different because they are not children in a suburb, with longer-term aspirations. We need to raise their standards, raise the game and give them something to fight for and let them see that you don't have to stay here. There is a much bigger world. Because they have got parents that come from here, grandparents that come from here who don't work, it just continues and it spirals.

Studies repeatedly note the social and emotional challenges faced by teachers who work with students living in deprived urban communities (Evans & English, 2002; Evans, 2004; Jensen, 2009). Teachers in our study also reported that students' behavioral problems and lack of motivation were related to their home environment, especially family instability and lack of emotional nurturing (Ackerman, Kogos, Youngstrom, Schoff, & Izard, 1999; Lichter,



Shanahan, & Gardner, 2002). Such instability is often manifested in dysfunctional relationships, lack of trust, feelings of hopelessness, and stress. For example, parents or adult carers' unstable employment may result in high mobility and this may lead to unstable friendships and difficulties in building trusting relationships with teachers. Children in impoverished homes have also been reported to receive twice as many reprimands as positive comments from parents who tend to be less responsive to their children's needs (Risley & Hart, 2006). Developmental psychologists' studies have found that the lack of stable and caring family relationships have a negative impact on children's social competence and emotional regulation in the long term (Sroufe, 2005; Szewczyk-Sokolowski, Bost, & Wainwright, 2005). The lack of emotional nurturing is likely to contribute to children's on-going behavioral problems, chronic stress, and helplessness. When parents or carers do not provide necessary support, teachers may be the only dependable and caring adult in their lives. In effect, the scale and complexity of the social and emotional challenges faced by teachers in these contexts mean that the capacity for everyday emotional resilience is not an option but a necessity.

### *1.2. Challenges of High Stakes External Accountability*

Managing students' behavioural challenges was often combined with meeting the demands of policy driven accountability systems. For many teachers in this school, visits by external assessors to evaluate classroom teaching made them feel "anxious" and "in panic." Steven commented on the intensive stress prior to the external assessors' visit.

You spend the weekend before panicking, even though you know you are doing everything you can and you spend sleepless nights worrying about whether you have done a good job or if they think you have done a good job, and whether or not you can prove you have done a good job. So it's all worry, worry, worry.

Teachers were also under daily pressure to complete significant amounts of paperwork as a means of recording and reporting on student progress and achievement. Dorothy commented how this pushed her to the edge of not coping.

It makes it harder to teach and it makes it harder to give the kids the positive, enthusiastic person that they really need. I'd say that that [paperwork] is single handedly the biggest challenge really, and the mixture of planning and assessing and all the other things that we have to do.... there seem to be more deadlines now than there used to be... I think the paperwork pushes us all to the edge of not coping... it's the paperwork that has us all threatening to resign, most days, to be honest.

In order to complete the necessary paperwork, Dorothy, as others, spent most weekends

working and found it, as a result, difficult not to be “grumpy” with the children on Mondays. High-stakes accountability has become a pervasive part of teachers’ daily lives. It has increased, expanded, intensified and regulated their roles, responsibilities and practices as they have responded to various policies and reform mandates to raise students’ achievement (Bailey, 2000; Lambert & McCarthy, 2006; Valli & Buese, 2007). Test-driven policies require frequent assessments, record keeping, and data analysis which increase teachers’ workload and limit their autonomy in the classroom (Troman, 2008). These are issues of particular concern for teachers working in high-needs urban classrooms. Pressures to meet the metrics of academic accountability outcomes are likely to increase levels of stress and erode their capacities to respond to students’ social and emotional demands (Stillman, 2011; Valli & Chambliss, 2007). A further source of teachers’ stress in high stakes accountability environments is teacher evaluation. As teachers in our study commented, external assessors’ visits created greater stress, exacerbating the pressures of their already challenging lives (Lavigne, 2014). It is not surprising, then, that some teachers experience stress, burnout, and job dissatisfaction, and that these contribute to the rate of teacher attrition, especially in high poverty schools (Calderhead, 2001; Valli & Buese, 2007).

### *1.3. Challenges of Work-Life Management*

Work-life management was an on-going challenge for both inexperienced and experienced teachers in this school. Each managed these differently according to circumstance, but there was no doubt of the costs of professional commitment that most experienced. Beverley, for example, found that she had to take students’ books home on a regular basis and so was, “not going out with my husband or the grandchildren.” Even Julie, the most experienced teacher, still felt the workload pressures that being a good professional posed for her personal life.

Saturday I spent all day doing reports because it’s that time of year when there is no other way of doing it. That does impact on family and friends, because you know that you can’t be arranging to do this, that and the other.

For all teachers, managing and sustaining a work-life balance was not something that could be achieved easily, but a continuing struggle. For Elisabeth, understanding and reminding herself of the importance of personal life helped her to pace her work.

I think it just takes a lot of being really strong and making sure that you do get that balance because otherwise if you don’t, then you suffer, your family suffers, your social life suffers..... when you first start you’re so enthusiastic to get everything done and to please everybody and do the best job that you can. I think as time wears on you realize I don’t need to do that right now. I do this first, I will do that later and it’s still going to be okay. I can still do my job.

Steven also realized the importance of guarding his personal life, but found that it was not

always easy.

It was work, work, work. The balance would come probably between 6 o'clock and 7:00 in the evening when you are so tired and you relax from work. It's all about having quality time. It's about maintaining that quality time in whatever you do and making it known to people that actually this is your life and you are going to have this time to yourself or your family, regardless of what comes up.

The continuing struggle to manage work-life balance is applicable not only to teachers, but also school leaders. Christine, the headteacher, commented on the difficulty of separating work and life, and warned of the perils of allowing the commitment to work to overwhelm them.

I think you have to be very careful and not let it overwhelm you. You need to carve out that time; that non-working time. No one can work 24/7. I think I'm fine if I know that I've done everything I can to sort out a situation before I go home. But if I know in my mind it's, I can't do anymore, then I'm kind of okay with that, but it's where I'll lose sleep this is when I'm thinking, ohh I have not been able to do that or a parent has threatened to talk to the [local] newspaper tomorrow... and that's hard.

Managing the allocation of time outside of school spent working, with family and friends and in other personal activities, was the most dominant source of stress for teachers at Winterton. The heavy workload and its negative impact on personal life made teachers in this school, the headteacher observed, feel "completely drained emotionally and physically because they put so much into their roles as teachers." This continually posed challenges to their sense of well-being, capacities to teach to their best and their effectiveness in terms of the progress and achievement of students. The tension between work and family has been defined as "a form of inter-role conflict in which the role pressure from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect" (Greenhaus & Buetell, 1985, p. 77). While research is scarce on teachers' work-life management, existing studies consistently report negative outcomes of the conflict between work life and personal life such as burnout, low well-being, job dissatisfaction, and early departure from career (Cinamon & Rich, 2005; Palmer et al., 2012; Panatik, Badri, Rajab, Rahman & Shah, 2011). This work-life conflict can also create a work "spillover" effect, resulting in stress and exhaustion, which negatively impacts both the quality of interaction with family members and the quality of work (Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Wethington, 1989; Palmer, Rose, Sanders, & Randle, 2012). The competing demands from work and personal life can, therefore, without active self-management and support from others, diminish teachers' physical, mental, and emotional capacities for resilience.

## *2. Variations in Individuals' Emotional Resilience Capacities (Research Question 2)*

There were fluctuations in and variations between teachers' capacities to sustain everyday emotional resilience in the face of personal and professional challenges in particular professional life phases. In order to illustrate their different responses to these challenges, we have selected examples from three teachers: i) an early career teacher with a strong 'call' to teach and a strong capacity for resilience; ii) a mid-career teacher who managed the challenges by 'drawing a line' between work and life; and iii) an experienced teacher who was barely coping. We provide each of these teachers' portraits to illustrate detailed and contextualized understandings of and variations in the need for emotional resilience in managing the challenges of teaching in disadvantaged school and community contexts.

### ***Natalie: Strong calling, a growing capacity for resilience***

Natalie was in her second year of teaching in this, her first school. With two close relatives in the profession, teaching had, "always intrigued" her and "there wasn't anything else I could see myself being". She was enthusiastic about its possibilities for creativity and variety and she "loved" working with children. She commented, "It's rewarding so that when you see a child that hasn't understood subtraction, finally understands it, you're like, yay! So it's that belief that they can do it and it gives you that belief that you have taught that child something." For her, teaching was a vocation, though she recognized the increased pressures of accountability and was well aware of the need for everyday resilience and the challenges of sustaining this.

Natalie highlighted the emotionally draining consequences of working with pupils from the school's high need community.

What was going on with a child in my class with the poor behaviour difficulties escalated so much and there were a lot of home issues, and that took quite a lot of my emotional energy.

Like other colleagues, she was able to manage successfully the challenges of students' behavioral problems and her workload, and she was cognizant of the essential reciprocity between the personal and the professional in teaching, what has been called, "the personal in the professional" (Author, 2004).

I'm trying to make sure that I get here [school] at a realistic time and I leave here at a realistic time. There are reports that have to be done on the weekend, which I've been doing, but it's making sure that I'm still leaving a lot of 'me' time... because at the end of the day you're still a person, you still have your family and friends... but as much as you try not to bring your personal life into work ... if it is in the back of your mind you don't feel like you're giving 100% to your teaching. It's hard to switch off either. So you've got to be

satisfied with both and happy with both really.

Natalie emphasized the support from family and friends

I have a great family who are very supportive and they understand when I've got lots of work to do. And I've got good friends. Three of my close friends aren't teachers. They don't know what it's like on a day to day basis but they're always supportive and they will make sure that I see them and they'll be quite complementary and understand when I'm feeling a bit rubbish.

She also acknowledged the critical role of professional support. The head teacher especially had been, "a fantastic support" by genuinely understanding the challenges Natalie was experiencing.

She understands what Key Stage One (5-7 year old pupils) is like because she's taught Key Stage One. It's quite challenging because they're so young, they demand every minute of your time and trying to do that that plus then teach and make sure it's still creative and engaging and they're still all doing what they can to the best of their ability, it can be quite challenging at times.... Before this half term, I did find myself feeling miserable because I wasn't sleeping and everything that was going on was just really hard; and [the head] noticed it because she texted me and to ask if I was okay. So she could see a difference in me and [the deputy head] did too.

With the professional and personal support, along with her strong sense of vocation and self-confidence, she had been able to sustain and increase her capacity for resilience

There is so much pressure on teachers nowadays, but you've just got to understand that you are doing the best you can and you've just got to keep going... I try not to give up easily because there's been so much going on in terms of things that need to be done at assessments, you have deadlines, so it's knowing that I can meet that deadline, it's knowing that I have the ability within myself and self-confidence. Over the last year especially I've tried to become more resilient in terms of just keeping going. Over the last two years, I think I've become more resilient in terms of the fact that I keep going. I don't get very disheartened by things anymore.

For this early career teacher, her strong sense of vocation, availability of emotional as well as practical support from outside as well as inside the school, and, perhaps, the absence of extensive and possibly problematic personal responsibilities, all contributed to Natalie's capacity for resilience.

***David: Managed Resilience: separation between work and life***

David had been teaching for 15 years and had worked in this school, teaching year 6 pupils (age 10-11 years), for the last six of these. This was the class that sat the national standard attainment tests (SATs). The results of these contributed to the external assessment of the quality of the school and this challenge caused him to feel stressed. He was a member of the senior leadership team, working closely with the head teacher on all aspects of school improvement.

David's biggest challenge was to keep the children in the class focused on the task at hand, whilst simultaneously meeting external accountability demands.

We are dictated to by levels and point scores ..... and there are children that haven't made that mark and that's depressing... We can't control what the government sets as our standard. There's a challenge to make sure that I'm doing the right thing, to make sure that I'm able to impart what wisdom I have and the good practice that I do or can do.

He managed this by accepting that there were some elements of teaching and learning which he could not control: for example, the attendance of the students.

If you've got children that are persistently absent, it's not necessarily the children's fault and there's not a great deal that I can do about it. So if they have missed another lesson, okay then we'll make sure we put in extra things to try and get them to catch up, but you know that there's only a certain amount that can be done.

David ensured that his life was not determined only by his work by making a conscious boundary between work and life. This helped him remain resilient and avoid burnout.

I don't want to be spending three hours a night marking books, so I look at ways to make sure I don't have to do that. I think that's when, say for example you get to the end of a week and you realize that such and such and such and such haven't got it, (but) you've given everything, you just go well, all right we've hit the wall now, we'll just have to cope with that. Maybe we'll have time to come back to it later..... The job is not a vocation. Whilst I love my job at times and I want to educate and the best for the kids, it's not the be all and end all of me.

As with all the teachers, he attributed much of his continued capacity for resilience to the headteacher.

The headteacher has a good vision and she's open with us, honest, which I

appreciate. You know she will challenge me further as well. You know she respects good ideas. But, like I say, it's the vision that she has that we share, that allows us to keep going.

David had taken a decision to protect himself from excessive stress and possible burnout. In doing so it may be that in limiting his depth of engagement with his students' behavioural and emotional needs he also limited their engagement in learning. Yet, while teaching had become more of a job to be managed with the head and the hand rather than also the heart, his core commitment to the education of the children in his class remained high. There was, in his words, "no stagnation going on here". He also enjoyed the challenge of the "uphill battle" to facilitate the education of the children.

***Katherine: Managing a more difficult life: drowning as capacity erodes***

Katherine had 11 years of experience of teaching and was currently a supply (cover) teacher at this school where she had taught previously for nine years before leaving temporarily as a result of on-going stress.

I just started to find the [previous] job very stressful... things were getting on top of me and it was affecting how I was feeling in my personal life... I felt there was more and more pressure on us as teachers and it wasn't making me happy anymore. I'd lost the passion that I had for the job.

The level of stress Katherine had experienced had fluctuated and was at its most extreme when faced with an Ofsted inspection

The thought of having Ofsted scares me. I don't cope very well under pressure.

Since returning to the school, despite acknowledging the high level of the support from the head teacher and deputy head, she had once again become stressed, not only because of the demands of external accountability but also in response to teaching children in a challenging inner city school.

I'm here much longer in the evenings. It's a tiring job anyway because you're constantly on the go... We have to accelerate all the progress all the time and some children just can't cope with that. Then again it comes back to feeling the guilt because you're made to feel like you haven't done the best for the children... Managing the class whilst also thinking about all these plates that you've got spinning all the time and little jobs you need to do is difficult because it's an inner city school, and the children do find it difficult to just sit on the carpet sometimes and listen... I think sometimes you're fighting a losing battle...

For Katherine, then, teaching had become a more difficult life over the years. The erosion of her capacity for resilience had been gradual and then hit “rock bottom” under the leadership of the previous headteacher.

I think that was down to the management of the school and the deputy that we had. Her interactions with staff weren’t great and she and the head clashed quite a lot. The school wasn’t a comfortable place to work.

The current head teacher and her deputy were supportive, for example by offering her extra time to complete pupil reports, and she was also supported by her colleagues and friends outside the school.

In terms of a team here, we are all really supportive and everybody, if you know people, can see that you’re feeling stressed and they’ll ask are you all right, and make sure you’re okay.

However, none of these supports were sufficient to enable her to manage rather than cope with the pressures. She continued to struggle with the workload and everyday challenges of teaching and the rigours associated with being more publicly accountable.

I feel like I’m drowning, ... totally overwhelmed, not knowing what to do... feeling of hopelessness ---barely coping... It sometimes gets me to the point where I feel tearful about it. I sit at the desk at the end of the day and it’s like what else can you do?

It is worth noting, also, that during this phase of her life Katherine had also experienced extremely difficult personal circumstances and felt that these, together with the pressure from the work, had a negative influence on her professional life, making it “doubly hard”.

Despite her deep commitment to her pupils, she was experiencing continuing behaviour problems from some students who were not focused on their own learning and whom she was unable to influence. In her own words, they “mess around and disrupt the lesson”. She was unable to teach to her best.

### *3. Leadership Support (Research Question 3)*

The principal was perceived by all to make significant on-going contributions in creating positive group-level dynamics and reserves of emotional energy where conjoint capacities, shared purposes and attributes had become sources of collective culture and strengths. Julie, the most experienced of the teachers, commented



[The head] is constantly keeping us in the picture of what the school needs to be doing, what we're trying to improve. It's more constant than it was before [under the previous head]. So it's support and she tells us things, she reminds us about things. There's a lot of meetings together as a senior leadership team to discuss. Also I know I can go to her and say, I don't know about this.

The headteacher's support was not only about her ability to share visions and strategies through on-going communications, but also about her genuine care about and for teachers and students. Elisabeth, a teacher for five years, found her always approachable.,

I have been to her with various issues or concerns or questions and she has always been really welcoming. If she has no time, then, she will say we will meet into after school and that's fine because everyone is busy, but yeah, really supportive and I always know I can go to her. The door is always open.

Another teacher, Beverley, highlighted the practical and emotional support provided by the head teacher and colleagues.

We are led by an incredible, resilient leader. She not only demands the best, she teaches it. She is very good at seeing stress in people and believing in people. She is an excellent leader and she's got a different way of doing things. She has a different position than the rest of us in terms of being able to manage. She is very good at recognizing when people have got too much pressure; and because I spend the whole day doing the paperwork sometimes, she will pay that time back. She recognizes and realizes those balance and time factors.

One of the key positive aspects of Christine's leadership identified by many teachers was a 'distribution' of leadership roles through which trusting relationships were built and responsibilities and power shared. Sue, the recently appointed deputy head teacher, articulated the positive impact of this.

She has clear, clear vision. I think that helps us. We know where we're going, we know what we want to achieve, and everyone is going towards the same thing. The head is very good at ... distributing leadership and we've all got our leadership roles. We're all developed and I think she does a really good job... at making sure everyone's got time and are valued.

Beverly too commented that, leadership in this school was not the headteacher's sole responsibility, but that all teachers' shared in this, both formally and informally.

We have got a really strong senior leadership team, who step up to the plate when they need to. That would be my biggest support. We go out collectively as staff, which is really nice and there's pockets: you know, the pocket of the senior manager, the pocket of the foundation team, the pocket of the class teachers and the phase leaders and, you know, there are lots of different pockets of things. I can work alone and I can meet deadlines, but I need people around me.

At Winterton, the headteacher's emotional support, care, and shared power and responsibilities were perceived by all teachers to make significant and on-going contributions in creating positive group-level dynamics and a collective sense of emotional resilience. She had created a collective 'belonging' culture for students, because "for a lot of children this is their only stable factor in their lives". The same was true for the teachers who perceived her as caring for them, helping to minimize the complexities and uncertainties by sharing a clear, consistent vision, maintaining close interpersonal relationships and distributing leadership roles and responsibilities, a characteristic of successful head teachers (Harris, 2004, 2009; Spillane, 2006). Peters and Pearce (2012) point to the special importance of the principal's support. School principals can be an important positive force in creating and sustaining caring, open and inclusive cultures and positive social interactions among staff (Moir, 2003; Johnson et al., 2012), teachers' identity and emotional well-being (Author et al., 2009; Crawford, 2009; Pearce & Morrison, 2011; Flores, 2006), job satisfaction and psychological health (Weber & Lederer, 2006; Schelvis et al., 2014). They are in a powerful position to support all staff through their understanding of policy movements and their influence on how these are received and enacted in school (Braun et al., 2010).

#### *4. Support of Family and Friends (Research Question 4)*

Often we do not consider teachers' lives beyond teaching, that is, that being a teacher is only part of a person, one piece of a larger unfolding life.

(Clandinin et al., 2015, p. 13)

Besides school-level leadership and relational support, personal support from outside the school (e.g., family, friends, community group members) was perceived by teachers to be an essential factor in sustaining teachers' capacities for resilience. Elisabeth, for example, explained the importance of family support, especially in the beginning of her career and in times of professional stress.

It took an awful lot of understanding and support from my family...when I first started teaching, they understood that there was all of these extra pressures upon me and everything else that went with it: the fact that I was now responsible for thirty children, as well as having potentially thirty sets of parents who wouldn't necessarily speak to me or could be quite difficult, all

those sorts of things. For a while it was challenging for my family to be able to understand, but then I was really open with them and then we talked about lots of things.

She emphasized the importance of protecting family time to maintain healthy dynamic and mutual support over the long term.

I always made sure that weekends were family time because I think we needed that time to just step away from all the reports and have our time so then come Monday morning we are all refreshed and ready to start again, and then we knew that for the weekend it would be family time again.

Dorothy mentioned how spending time with friends and having hobbies helped her to release her stress.

I am lucky in that I've got a group of friends who do understand and do let me, in the times I do see them, just rant. I am lucky that I have a hobby that distracts me. I have horses, so every evening I have to go ... you can't be worrying about school whilst trying to feed the hay to the horses. It's a complete shift away, a time when my mind just goes away from school.

These teachers' responses illustrate how the continuing combinations of supportive professional and personal relationships, as well as individual assets, combined in different ways to support and sustain teachers' capacity for resilience. Rosenfield and Richman (1997), among a growing number of researchers, have drawn attention to the importance of emotional support from significant others; and Cefai and Cavioni (2014) highlight the roles played by a caring professional community.

## **Conclusions**

The findings from this, albeit small scale research, add to and extend existing knowledge about the nature of and influences on teachers' capacities for emotional resilience. They provide new knowledge about the kinds of everyday challenges that teachers who work in highly disadvantaged urban school settings experience; the personal, workplace, relational and policy factors that influence teachers' individual and collective capacities for emotional resilience; and the causes of variations between these.

In terms of Research Question 1, ('What kinds of collective challenges do teachers who work in highly disadvantaged urban school settings experience?'), the relative impact of standards and results-driven government reform agendas on teachers' attrition have been shown to be mediated, positively or negatively, by the strength of their 'calling' to teach and in-school conditions (Boyd et al., 2011; Johnson, Kraft, & Papay, 2012; Loeb, Darling-Hammond, &

Luczak, 2005). However, whilst strong moral purpose and sense of vocation are important contributors to teachers' capacities for emotional resilience, even these are likely to be tested in particular personal and professional circumstances. Extreme emotional, learning and behavioral challenges posed by students, combined with external demands for academic accountability, are likely to combine to cause the need for greater and more enduring general and everyday capacities for emotional resilience in teachers who work in schools that serve disadvantaged, vulnerable communities. These challenges need to be managed at individual and organizational level if teachers are to be able to teach to their best. In terms of Research Question 2, ('Are there variations between teachers' capacities for emotional resilience?'), there are variations in the ways and the extent to which teachers in schools that serve high need communities respond to the challenges. Their ability to manage these is likely to affect their confidence, desire and energy to engage their students in learning and achievement, and their perceived effectiveness. Differences in the levels of capacity for emotional resilience among teachers are not necessarily associated with age, teaching experience or gender, but teachers' ability to manage combinations of supportive influences as well as their individual assets including moral purpose, emotional energy, and relationships with colleagues and school leaders. In terms of Research Question 3, ('What is the role of the headteacher in promoting the capacity for emotional resilience in teachers?'), building and sustaining the capacity for resilience is not only an individual responsibility, but rather "a process located at the interface of personal and contextual challenges and resources" (Mansfield et al., 2014, p. 547). Teachers' capacities for resilience need to be nurtured and supported within the school. On-going emotional and practical 'close up' support of the head teacher is key to building and sustaining individual and collective capacities for resilience. It is likely to prevent attrition and contribute to teacher retention. In terms of Research Question 4, ('How important is the support of family and friends?'), the research reported in this paper challenges the 'false distinction' between the 'personal' and the 'professional.' It draws attention, for example, to the differences that can be made by various types of support provided formally and informally, for example, the critical role played by family and friends and in-school task appreciation by school leaders and colleagues (Papatraianou & Le Cornu, 2014; Mansfield, Beltman, & Price, 2014).

To teach to one's best each day, to be able to draw upon personal as well as professional resources, at different times and in persisting predictable and unpredictable emotionally challenging circumstances, requires an enduring and sustainable capacity for individual, relational and collective emotional resilience. This is important for the maintenance of moral purpose, commitment, sense of efficacy and positive professional identity, optimism, hope and effectiveness of teachers. It requires, also, the continuing investment of professional and personal resources: intrinsic motivation (Author et al., 2011; Chong & Low, 2009); vocational commitment and optimism (Author et al., 2009; Gu & Li, 2013; Hansen, 1995); hope (Author, 2004; McCann & Johannessen, 2004); high self-efficacy (Brunetti, 2006; Kitching, Morgan, & O'Leary, 2009); and agency (Castro et al., 2010). However, whilst these personal attributes or assets are necessary, they are not sufficient. To be emotionally resilient

also requires, as we have seen in these teachers' accounts, combinations of individual and collective support from their colleagues and headteacher, friends and families if teachers are to build and sustain their capacities for emotional resilience. Teachers need psycho-social support and care (Author et al., 2006; Barley & Beesley, 2007) as they seek to sustain a sense of competences, autonomy, well-being and achievement in their struggles to contribute to students' learning and achievement (Howard & Johnson, 2004; Ryan & Deci, 2002). They need the support of different combinations of leadership, colleague and external personal interventions at different times in their working lives.

The amounts and degrees of internal, situated and external support experienced at any one time, whilst helpful, may not always directly increase all teachers' longer-term capacities for resilience. For some resilience will grow, whilst for others it may become fragile and for some it will erode. Teachers whose capacity for resilience is high are likely to be those who actively participate in shaping, building and sustaining their capacity for resilience. It is this active management, called by some "agency," (Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, & Paloniemi, 2013) that may lead them to a strong, abiding sense of individual, relational and collective resilience.

Finally, the work and lives of teachers in this study are unlikely to be radically different from those who teach in similar contexts in other countries. They show that there are variations in the strength of teachers' capacities for sustaining emotional resilience whilst they simultaneously manage the everyday, extreme behavioural, academic and emotional challenges that are rooted in disadvantaged home and community environments and the demands of external policy. Teachers at Winterton saw their capacity for emotional resilience as essential to the success of their work in the school, in which the collective challenge of the socio-economic environment of the community, lack of home caring and consequential behaviour and learning problems encountered with some students continually and others intermittently were an ever present feature of the landscapes of their work. The working lives of these teachers illustrate that the essential nature of the best and most effective teaching requires the person to be present in the professional, that the best teaching requires the head (intellectual engagement), the hand (classroom competences) and the heart (the emotions). They also indicate that individual vocation or "calling" (Hansen, 1995) through which teachers draw upon their own inner resources seems to be a necessary but insufficient condition for teachers' to manage the challenges of educating pupils in challenging urban schools effectively. Although many teachers make conscious choices to teach in schools which serve high need communities, their initial passion, commitment and resilience cannot easily be sustained if working conditions impede their willingness and capacities to teach to their best. Without an understanding of how their resilience may be nurtured and sustained, and in particular the head teacher's role in building and sustaining this capacity, high-poverty urban schools may continue to fill vacancies with "underqualified teachers who are not only less prepared to teach but also migrate and leave schools at higher rates than their certified peers" (Olsen & Andersen, 2007, p. 6), which will negatively impact students' learning and

development.

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